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ABSTRACT

Early childhood teachers generally have not recognized that assessment is a necessary adjunct to effective teaching, but instead have concluded that it is the concern of special educators or program evaluators. In fact, assessment can play a most important role in planning for and instructing all children. Assessment can be defined as a conscious, systematic process that includes (1) setting program goals; (2) setting child goals in relation to program goals; (3) pinpointing the child's status in relation to goal achievement; (4) developing and implementing goal-targeted instruction, including ongoing evaluation and modification when required; and (5) evaluating summatively both child and group attainment of goals, thus evaluating teaching. It is legitimate to expect teachers to use selected assessment procedures when appropriate and to be aware of the benefits of such procedures. Valuable assessment tools for early childhood educators include norm-referenced and criterion-referenced tests, casual and sporadic observation, and task analyses that describe children's modes of processing information and identify subtask sequences (the mastery of which leads to mastery of a complex terminal task). The idea of assessing all children involves a mind-set rather than a prescription; in other words, it serves as a reminder that a total group approach is as inappropriate in early education as it is in special education. (RH)

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Assessment: A Teaching Prerequisite

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Assessment: A Teaching Prerequisite

How do early childhood teachers know what to teach and how to teach? Some follow a published curriculum guide, some follow the scope-and-sequence chart in a teacher's manual, and some base their instructional program on state-mandated goals for each grade level. Pre-school goals may be taken from a developmental checklist, or from a model curriculum; they may be at the whim of the teacher and/or director; they may be dictated by the local kindergarten-readiness expectations, or by the parents whose children are in a particular program or center.

Regardless of the source, every early education program has goals for its children. They may be explicitly stated or they may be implicitly assumed. However, not all programs attempt to learn if these goals have been reached. Some evaluate the children's learning at the end of the year with a standardized, norm-referenced test. In this instance, the assumed results of the teaching are learned after the fact, and usually when the children are being sent on to the next age-level class, or to public school. The majority of the published tests in both education and psychology enable us to compare individual scores to group norms. They are useful in evaluating the standing of one child in a large group of children. They are not of specific help in guiding the teacher's efforts in teaching a particular child.

Assessment has different meanings for different people. It has received an increasing amount of national attention over the last fifteen years for three major reasons. First, educators at all age levels are being held accountable for their efforts, and assessment as testing at the end of a unit of study or at the end of a specified time period is used continuously during

the public school years. Another meaning of assessment was introduced to pre-school programs, when it was mandated that the federally funded programs justify their existence in terms of early intervention in the lives of educationally disadvantaged children. Third, the passage of Public Law 94-142 mandated the identification of children who were educationally at-risk by reason of a categorized handicapping condition. It also mandated a statement of individual long-range or annual goals, and a recommendation for the placement of an identified child in an existing situation: at home, a general classroom, or a special classroom. The emphasis in the placement decision is on the appropriateness of the situation, not on modifications of the situation to best serve the child. Teachers who have mainstreamed children in their classes are sometimes left without specific guidelines for methods, content, and/or physical or social environments. They have relied on trial and error. If done systematically and consciously, the trial and error method is the heart of the assessment-for-teaching process.

Because of these publicized and/or mandated interpretations of assessment--the classroom testing of content already presented, the evaluation of federally funded programs, and the screening and diagnosis of children with special needs--many early childhood teachers have not recognized the fact that assessment is an integral part of every educational endeavor, and should provide the basis for instructional planning and implementation in their preschools and day care centers.

The recent position statement of the National Association for the Education of Young Children suggests guidelines for early childhood education teacher education programs, but does not include the word assessment. It does,

however, stipulate the necessity for each teacher candidate to have knowledge and skills in goal setting, and in observing and recording children's behavior "for purposes of assistance in achieving goals, providing for individual needs, and appropriately guiding children" (NAEYC, 1982, pp. 4-5). Goal setting and observation are two key components of the assessment process, and they belong in the education of all young children, not just those who have been diagnosed as having a handicapping condition.

It is true that every early childhood teacher has goals for the program, and perhaps even goals for some individual children in the program. These may be stated in global terms, or in very specific terms, and are frequently included in newsletters for the parents, or in publicity brochures. However, it is sometimes difficult for an observer to relate the on-going classroom activities to the stated goals. Preschool or nursery educators have traditionally stated goals in terms of the developmental needs of the children, and have emphasized the designing of the physical and social environments to meet these developmental needs. The curriculum in some classes has been derived from the intuition of the teacher, or from published curriculum guides containing suggested units of study. The usual units cover modes of transportation, seasons, holidays, colors and shapes, community helpers, farm animals, and the like. The underlying assumption of this approach is that children "ought to know..." and are interested in these aspects of their world. Little attention is given to the possibility that some of the children have already been responsible for the care of an animal, or that some already know the colors and shapes, or that others have not learned their colors and shapes, even by the end of the color-and-shape unit. In other classrooms, it apparently is

assumed that learning (or reaching the stated goals) is achieved by osmosis, because little planned instruction takes place. Therefore, when some children are tested at the end of the year, and are found not ready for kindergarten, the teacher sustains a clear conscience by stating that "she has a short attention span," or "he is immature," or "what can we expect, considering the home environment?" Any or all of these reasons may be valid; nonetheless they focus on the child's deficits and by-pass the teaching responsibility of the teacher.

It is also true that every teacher of young children observes, and perhaps makes some record of, the behaviors of the children. Occasionally, they conclude that the behavior of one or more of their children differs from the normal range of age-appropriate behaviors, and they request a formal evaluation by an outside assessor. A typical evaluation might read "the child has a visual-perceptual-motor disorder" as evidenced by the performance on one or more standardized tests. The teacher has learned nothing more than could have been observed in the on-going classroom activities, although she might be reinforced for her suspicions of a problem in visual-perceptual-motor behavior! Indeed, this behavior is what prompted the request for the formal evaluation.

Even though early childhood teachers set goals for their programs, and observe their children, it does not necessarily follow that they consider assessment as a prerequisite to teaching. It is true that normal children seem to get along and not cause trouble in a normal classroom without individualized instructional planning, and without any conscious assessment of their skills and abilities. But should the teacher who claims to be a

professional be content with children just getting along? This is not a plea for an academically-oriented preschool program, but it is a plea for a child-oriented program in which realistic but challenging goals are set for the children, and plans are made and implemented to help the children reach these goals. The recommended technique is assessment, which can be incorporated into a unit approach or a curriculum guide approach or even an informed intuitive approach; it can be used in total group, small group, or one-to-one instruction.

Assessment: Its Definition and Components

Assessment can be defined as a conscious, systematic process which includes: 1) program goal setting; 2) child goal setting (related to program goals); 3) pinpointing the child's status toward achieving the child goal; 4) development and implementation of goal-targeted instruction, including ongoing evaluation and modifications when called for; and 5) terminal evaluation of both child and group attainment of the stated goals, and therefore of the teaching.

The first step in any systematic assessment is the setting of goals. Every program which serves young children, whether it be called preschool, nursery school, day care, or whatever, is an educational program. It contains adults who are teaching and children who are learning, even when the teaching and learning are not intentional. Goals provide direction, and even the most non-academic day care center has the goal of children interacting with one another without biting or fighting! Few states have prescribed goals for pre-kindergarten programs, but many state and local agencies have indicated

their expectations for children who are entering kindergarten and have specifically stated the learnings which must be achieved by the end of the kindergarten year. In these situations, goals for the pre-kindergarten programs are sometimes conceived as predetermined; the program goal is to get children ready for kindergarten. Even the centers which rely on parental decisions as to goals and other matters are frequently geared toward the expectations of the public schools, and the teachers acquiesce, even if they question the appropriateness of these goals. In some instances, there may be no written statement of goals, but they exist in some vague form in the teacher's mind; in other cases, they may be formally stated in a policy statement, or less formally stated in the first issue of a newsletter for parents. They may range from the general "to provide a good experience for four-year-olds" to the more specific "to complete the reading and math readiness program." Both of these goals may be situation-appropriate, but neither gives much guidance for instructional planning and teaching.

Individual child goal-setting should be conceptually related to the general program goals and to the child's developmental needs. This is an area in which early education is weak, and early special education is strong. Perhaps the notion that a child with an identified handicapping condition will take longer to learn is responsible for the focusing on individual needs and goals. If early childhood teachers operationalized their oft-stated beliefs in individuality and uniqueness, they too would attend to individual goal setting as well as program goal setting. Some guidance for individual goal setting may be obtained from commercially published tests, the majority of which are norm-referenced. In frequent use are the Denver Developmental

Screening Test (DDST), the Developmental Indicators for the Assessment of Learning (DIAL), the Developmental Screening Inventory (DSI), and the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT). These instruments, and others like them, use a norm population as a frame of reference, and help in identifying suspected developmental lags in children which necessitate further testing. Their scores may be expressed in terms of a somewhat general IQ or DQ or MA or grade level. They tap a limited sample of behaviors, but are helpful in describing a child's total development. The diagnosis referred to previously ("the child has a visual-perceptual-motor disorder") is representative of the results of a norm-referenced test. Some teachers put a misplaced trust in norm-referenced instruments, even though there may be little or no evidence of reliability or validity, and adopt the published norms as goals for their own programs or even for individual children. This approach to goal-setting is better that the intuitive approach, but it is insufficient and inappropriate. Norm-referenced tests are designed for, and appropriately used for, screening purposes only.

Criterion-referenced instruments serve the goal-setting purpose more appropriately, and also incorporate some aspects of assessment-for-teaching and assessment-for-learning components. They evaluate a child's performance in terms of a specific criterion (objective or task), which may be a program or child sub-goal. Commonly used criterion-referenced tests in early education as well as in early special education are the Boehm Test of Basic Concepts, the Brigance Diagnostic Inventory of Early Development, the Learning Accomplishment Profile-D, and the Portage Guide to Early Education. The

Boehm Test was designed to measure mastery of basic concepts of time, quantity, and space. The others include normal sequences of development in several domains. The results of these and similar criterion-referenced tests are easily translatable to sequential and individualized lesson plans, because the test scores indicate what a child has already learned, and what the child needs to learn in order to master a particular skill or ability. Although the specific skills or abilities included in any one instrument may not be those selected as goals, they do cover the general developmental areas of sensory-motor, language, cognitive, social-emotional, and self-help skill development.

Individual goal-setting may also be the result of observations. Although early childhood teachers are well versed with the need for observation, not all of them incorporate it on a systematic basis. True, there are somewhat casual and/or sporadic attempts in most programs. Casual observations can provide general information which is adequate when every child is progressing as expected. Even if "as expected" could be defined, few classrooms contain such a homogeneous group of children, even when they all fall within the normal range of development. It is the rare classroom that does not include at least one or two "problem" children. For instance, not even a master teacher can always hold the attention of all children in a total-group instructional situation. What about the inattentive child, the restless child, the disruptive child? We may reprimand, we may ignore, we may ask the aide to sit next to and control, or we may even excuse the child from the activity, suggesting an alternate individual activity. But do we ever wonder what caused the problem? Perhaps the child couldn't see or hear what was happening, perhaps

the child didn't understand, or was not interested, or already knew, or was upset because of some out-of-school problem. Or, perhaps it was the teaching method and content which were not appropriate. All aspects of the situation need to be assessed, and changes made according to the findings. This is what is meant by diagnostic teaching, and it is used by all effective teachers in all program areas. Sporadic observation refers to the somewhat concentrated efforts to get ready for a parent conference. Anecdotal records, behavior checklists, event sampling, and frequency counts are all examples of observation techniques, and portray the child's current status in selected areas of development and learning. Armed with this information, the teacher is ready to report that Johnny or Susie can rote count to five, doesn't know all the colors yet, shares his/her toys sometimes, has trouble in settling down at rest-time, likes to build with blocks and put together puzzles, and does (or does not) have a long attention span. After the conference, the status report is usually filed until it is time for the next conference, when it is pulled and updated. This is sad. The report could serve as a logical basis for individual programming and thereby increase teaching effectiveness. When used in an appropriate manner, observation is an important and integral part of assessment. It is the key to effective goal-setting, and to effective teaching.

A useful approach to observation is the same technique used in the criterion-referenced tests--task analysis. There are two approaches to task analysis, both of which are best accomplished in the classroom by a teaching adult. First, an analysis of the child's modes of receiving, understanding, and expressing what has been learned can be achieved through systematic trial

and evaluation of instructional strategies and situations. Second, an analysis of the task itself, which results in a sequential list of sub-tasks, the mastery of which leads to the mastery of the more complex terminal task. Teachers can usually state the sub-skills needed to reach program goals or child goals in general terms. But for the child who is not progressing "as expected," it is helpful to identify the trouble spots, and to focus teaching efforts on these. This identification is easily done if the task itself has been analyzed. First, it must be acknowledged that almost all learning requires prerequisite understanding, skills and concepts. For instance, printing one's name at the top of a painting is a complex skill, and involves many teachable sub-skills. It requires finger dexterity, eye-hand coordination, and controlled paint brush handling. It also depends upon the understanding of the concept "top," the ability to copy, and the memory of how the printed name looks. It does not include the ability to name the letters of the alphabet, or even the letters in the name. When it has been determined that the prerequisite skills have been mastered, the task analysis might look like this:

1. Can paint straight horizontal and vertical lines when shown a model.
2. Can paint closed circles and open curves when shown a model.
3. Can paint 1 and 2 from memory (without a model).
4. Can paint T o m at top of painting, when copying a model.
5. Can paint T o m at top of painting without a model.

It can be readily seen that each of the five components can be further analyzed, if needed. The number of teaching components will vary with the child and

and the task. Standard teaching practice is to start teaching the first step beyond the child's current performance.

Task analysis can be applied to all areas of the curriculum, although the literature usually supplies examples in self-help skills and gross and fine motor skills. An example of task analysis in the social domain might relate to a universal early childhood goal, that of appropriate interaction with peers. If Johnny or Susie are developmentally ready for cooperative play, but always choose to play by themselves, intuition leads us to encourage them to join in the total group activities, without considering the intermediate steps, or sub-tasks. Simply stated, the path to group interaction goes from solitary to parallel to associative to cooperative activity first with one child, then with two, and so on. The recognized stages of play development really form a gross task analysis, and can guide teaching efforts. At the preschool level, learning how to play is even more important than learning how to print one's name. But teachers seem to work on the name-printing, and let play develop on its own.

Real teaching starts where the child is, and moves the child in the desired direction. If learning does not occur, the teacher evaluates the methods and materials of instruction, and tries again. In other words, the teacher assesses. Assessment has no value for the teacher unless it tells the teacher what to do.

Conclusion

Assessment has not been recognized as a teaching prerequisite by many early childhood teachers, who have somehow concluded that assessment is the concern of special educators, or of program evaluators. But assessment

as presented can play a viable and essential role in planning for and instructing all children. It is unrealistic, and not even necessary, to expect that early childhood classroom teachers should be required to assess each child's development in each major area, to task analyze each instructional objective and goal, and to engage in the systematic continuous assessment of each child's progress, and each teaching strategy. It is realistic, however, to expect classroom teachers to use selected assessment procedures when called for, and to be aware of the benefits of such procedures.

The concept of assessment in a non-handicapped classroom involves a mind-set rather than a prescription; it reminds us that a total group approach is as inappropriate in early education as it is in special education.

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